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SIPDIS

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TAGS: BY CVIS ECON PHUM PL PREL SOCI

SUBJECT: BELARUSIAN VISA APPLICANTS SPEAK OUT ON  
MOTIVATIONS FOR IMMIGRATING TO THE U.S.

Classified By: DCM QUANRUD REASONS 1.5 (B AND D).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) As the post responsible for processing IVs for Belarusians, and one of the posts designated for Belarusian NIV interviews, Embassy Warsaw regularly interacts with Belarusians of all walks of life. We took the opportunity to ask several Belarusian IV and NIV applicants about their views on the Belarusian economic situation and their motivations for immigrating to the United States. Over a period of four months, we interviewed 10 Belarusian immigrant and non-immigrant visa applicants from cities throughout Belarus. Although this is not a scientific survey of Belarusian attitudes towards the regime and its policies, we believe that it provides an interesting anecdotal snapshot of what the average Belarusian may think -- at least among those who travel abroad or emigrate. Despite the Lukashenko regime's continued authoritarian rule and the climate of fear that permeates Belarusian society, all of the applicants immigrating were doing so for economic not political reasons, citing growing economic concerns and bleak prospects for the future. This cable was cleared by Embassy Minsk. END SUMMARY.

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THE BELARUSIANS ARE COMING!  
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¶2. (SBU) While the total number of Belarusian IV applicants remains far below the number for Poles and Ukrainians in Warsaw, the number of IVs issued to Belarusians has steadily risen from 582 in FY06 to 639 in FY07 to 796 in FY08. Belarusian applicants tend to be highly educated and gainfully employed and do not appear to be a high fraud risk.

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CONCERNS ABOUT THE ECONOMIC SITUATION RISING  
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¶3. (SBU) All of the applicants interviewed expressed concerns over the worsening economic situation in Belarus, with the Diversity Visa applicants citing economic fears and poor prospects in the future as their primary reasons for immigrating. A lawyer from Minsk lamented that his salary was cut 20 percent overnight following the Belarusian ruble's sudden 20 percent devaluation in January 2009. Two married doctors from Molodechno noted that the city's economic situation has become very unstable and fear a return to the era of Soviet-era breadlines. A self-employed salesperson of construction materials in Minsk complained that the economic slowdown has halted

Minsk's construction boom, which has led to a sharp decline in sales and profit. A bus driver from Lida noted that following the government's announcement to devalue the Belarusian ruble, locals rushed to the local banks to withdraw all of their savings. He added that people no longer trust Belarusian banks. (Note: Other applicants interviewed reported similar incidents occurring in their cities. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Two managers of a private chain store in Minsk that sells imported photo equipment, who applied for non-immigrant visas, told us that the current economic crisis has led to a sharp rise in prices for food and household equipment. They said they were forced to raise their prices by 15 percent in order to cover the increasing cost of importing their products. Several applicants also noted that, unlike in the West where prices have dropped, prices for many items (such as foodstuffs) remain the same or have increased.

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STATE PROPAGANDA BACKFIRING  
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¶5. (SBU) In addition to their fears about the economic situation, all of the applicants expressed anger with the government's efforts to cover up the truth about Belarus, economic problems with false propaganda. Most applicants accused Lukashenko and state media of ignoring reality and outright lying to the public in order to portray Belarus as a country untouched by the global economic crisis. All of the applicants pointed to Lukashenko's decision to devalue

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the Belarusian Ruble by 20 percent overnight, despite his promises that no such devaluation would occur, as a perfect example. The Lida bus driver said that people no longer trust the president after the Belarusian Ruble to dollar exchange rate suddenly worsened, despite his promises that no such devaluation would occur. A fireman from Novopolotsk said that while government statements about pay raises were true, there was little mention in state-controlled media about the rise in prices, taxes and general expenditures which are much higher than people's new income.

¶6. (SBU) Several applicants also pointed out that many of Belarus, main state enterprises, including the MAZ tractor plant, have been severely impacted by recent events despite the Lukashenko regime's repeated assertions that Belarus, industry will not be affected by the crisis. The applicants reported that slumping sales and rising production costs have forced these industries to cut shifts and force their workers to take unpaid leave.

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CLIMATE OF FEAR/OPPOSITION INEFFECTIVENESS CONTINUES  
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¶7. (C) While all of those interviewed said that socioeconomic reasons motivated their immigration to the U.S., the applicants also expressed their concerns with the continuing climate of fear existing in Belarus today. Many of the applicants said that everyone they knew was afraid to speak out about the situation. One applicant, a student at the prestigious Presidential Management Academy in Minsk (which is affiliated with the Presidential Administration), told Conoff that given the ongoing diplomatic standoff between Minsk and Washington, she was too afraid to tell any of her friends or students about her plans to immigrate to the United States.

¶8. (C) Particularly noteworthy during the interviews was the complete lack of commentary about the opposition, or their efforts to mount any organized response to the Lukashenko regime's handling of the economic crisis

(including the recent March 25 opposition demonstration in Minsk). When we asked one applicant about his views about the opposition, the applicant merely waived his hand with a disgusted look on his face. When asked how the situation could change for the better in Belarus, nobody could come up with a specific suggestion other than "things need to change."

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COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Despite the Lukashenko regime,s efforts to assuage concerns that Belarus is a prosperous authoritarian island in a sea of capitalist ruin, it is obvious that at least some Belarusians are no longer buying the party line. In fact, many who visited Embassy Warsaw are angry that the government spends its energies promoting a "Potemkin Village" portrayal of Belarus rather than addressing the population,s concerns. Despite the gloomy picture and lack of prospects for their future, none of the applicants could point to a viable alternative to Lukashenko who could fix the economy or improve the political situation. The lack of any mention or support of opposition efforts to resolve the economic crisis hints at the democratic opposition,s continued inability to build its support base among the general population. Should Belarus, economic woes worsen, we could possibly see an even greater increase in Belarusian immigrant applicants as more and more try to get out when given the chance. END COMMENT.

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